

Where Are the Italian-American Novelists?

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In the winter of 1955, I began writing a novel about my father, describing his childhood in a highly superstitious postmedieval mountain village in southern Italy, a village that had been warped by earthquakes and the sadistic rule of foreign kings and had been altered spiritually by the ministrations of a levitating fifteenth-century monk. Before the novel was half done, however, I decided to abandon it. I was concerned that a book focusing on my father's past would bring him unwanted attention and perhaps even ridicule from his American friends and neighbors in the conservative Anglo-Saxon community along the New Jersey shoreline, where, after 30 years of residence, he was accepted as an assimilated citizen of the United States.

The instinct to protect my father should come as no surprise to the American-Italian writers of my generation. Not to protect the privacy of one's family from the potential exploitation of one's prose was considered unpardonable within our ethnic group, which was overwhelmingly of southern Italian origin and was still influenced, even a generation or two after our parents' or grandparents' arrival in America, by that Mediterranean region's ancient exhortations regarding prudence, family honor and the safeguarding of secrets. A region that for 2,000 years had been conquered and reconquered by despots of every imaginable variety and vice is a region with an implicit history of caution and a people united in the fear of being found out.

Although the conquest of southern Italy by northern Italian forces in the nineteenth century unified the country for the first time since the fall of the Roman Empire, it parenthetically destroyed a once-autonomous southern Kingdom centered in Naples and further undermined the latter's fragile economy—encouraging a massive turn-of-the-century departure of southerners heading for America with new hopes and old fears. My grandparents were on those boats, along with the forebears of many future Americans who would fulfill the greatest of immigrant expectations and add to the front pages of newspapers such headline names as LaGuardia and DiMaggio, Sinatra, Iacocca and Cuomo. And yet as an American-born youth growing up during World War II (a war in which two of my father's brothers fought in Mussolini's army against the invading Allies), and as a young writer in the postwar years coming to terms with my insecurities as an American, I began to sense broadly within my ethnicity, and narrowly within myself, lingering ties to the old fears of the turn-of-the-century boat people—a fear of being pulled down, or pulled back, by currents having nothing to do with the ocean and everything to do with the Italian peninsula from which I was socially estranged and linguistically ignorant. I began to see myself not as a hyphenated American but as a hybrid American, a maverick struggling to break loose from the huddled masses that I saw as an obstacle to my singular identity and freedom.

But how free could I be while caught between the gravitational pull of two worlds? How American can one feel when growing up in a household headed by a proud and assertive father who spoke English with an accent, who restricted our family record-player to Italian operas, and who, failing to get our town's Methodist school board to include Ovid and Dante in our classroom studies, nearly convinced me that I should retaliate by not reading the works of Shakespeare? "Italy was giving art to the world when those English were living in caves and painting their faces blue!" my furious and defensive father often declared to me during the war years. It was a time when most Americans saw Italians as ditch-diggers or gangsters or Fascists, and when my pubescent paranoia, augmented by my father's Anglophobia, persuaded me that Shakespeare was indeed partly to blame for the lowly status of Italians in America.

With anguish and confusion I left home in 1949 to attend the University of Alabama, which had accepted me after I had been rejected by the half-dozen Eastern colleges to which I had applied earlier. My entrance into Alabama should in no way demean an institution to which I remain grateful; rather let me suggest that as a southern school not yet ready to admit blacks, but neither wanting its campuses overcrowded just with people whistling Dixie, it was most generous in welcoming out-of-state students that the Klan

saw as borderline whites—students who were Italian or Jewish, Greek, Lebanese or Syrian.

At Alabama, a literature faculty with exclusively Anglo-Saxon surnames assigned us to read writers with exclusively Anglo-Saxon surnames. For me this meant more Shakespeare and Marlowe, and also Donne, Pope and Fielding, Blake, Wordsworth and Tennyson, and countless others, as well as their literary cousins and offspring in New England. I read them all begrudgingly, critically, almost hating myself when I loved them (as I did Byron and Browning), while always reminding myself that they were not my literary ancestors and that they had nothing to do with my world—if indeed, as a fractional American, I had a world.

Unable to find contemporary novels by Italian-American authors in the university bookshop or the library, I was drawn to writers who were Irish American or Jewish, my reading passion then being modern fiction. Among the Jewish writers my favorite was Irwin Shaw, whose smooth style I devoured as delectably as the chocolate candy bars that nourished my acne; among the Irish, it was John O'Hara, in whose outsider's voice I heard echoes of my own.

Although I sometimes thought of becoming a writer, and served on the staff of my college newspaper, I never tried out for the campus literary magazine, nor applied to Professor Hudso Strode's writing class; in fact I never felt compelled to write about anything in depth until, after college, while I was in the army and stationed in Germany, I went on furlough to my father's village in Italy. It was a furlough into the Middle Ages. It was there among crumbling Norman walls, and veiled women balancing clay pots on their heads, and bloody-kneed penitents crawling up rocky paths, and my kinfolk tilling the soil of the family farm with antique hoes, that I saw the opening chapter of a novel about my father's escape to America—an escape with feelings of desertion and guilt that I also believe accompanied his quest for a better life.

But when I began describing this in the book, together with my own boyhood conflicts with my father during World War II (my memories of him smashing my model airplanes of Allied bombers and fighters as the U.S. Air Force was raiding southern Italy), I began to feel that I was violating the tradition of family confidentiality that was fundamental to my father—an assimilated man on the surface, but with interior ties to the ancient southern Italian code of *omerta* (silence) that guided not only the Mafia but also their countrymen who had traveled with them to the New World. And so I, too, became protective of my past, and distanced myself from myself, eventually entering a profession that encouraged this—journalism, which would provide me with a career-cover for the better part of a decade.

Journalists specialize in revealing other people's lives and families, their achievements and shortcomings; and in this profession, from the late 1950s into the mid-1960s, I proved to be more than capable. But denied the emotional involvement that writers fully feel only when writing from the "inside," I identified strongly with the works of other writers—not the writers of current events, or history, or biography, or other categories of nonfiction or "realism" in which we journalists were the foot soldiers of fact-gathering—but rather with those seemingly uninhibited autobiographical novelists, short-story writers, and playwrights who, unlike myself, were not averse to exposing themselves and their loved ones under the guise of "fiction."

Whether it was a protagonist on a Broadway stage that a Tennessee Williams or a Eugene O'Neill had clearly drawn from a family closet, or the alter ego in a novel by John Cheever or Philip Roth, who drank or lusted his way through life, I was no less in awe of these writers' candor than of their literary talents. It was more than awe; it was an envy of their freedom, and an awareness as well that these and similar writers had gained wide public acclaim through the exploitation of intimacy. And, of course, I was conscious of the fact that, among the nation's most famous novelists and dramatists, there was a conspicuous absence of Americans with Italian surnames.

Why was this? How was it possible that of the estimated 20 million Americans with Italian roots—a group that among my generation produced such heralded Americans as the painter Frank Stella, the architect Robert Venturi, and hosts of film directors, educators, financiers, and scientists—that this group was so under-represented in the ranks of well-known creative American writers? Were there no Italian-American Arthur Millers and Saul Bellows, James Baldwins and Toni Morrisons, Mary McCarthys and Mary Gordons, writing about their ethnic experiences?

When seeking answers to such questions from my acquaintances in Italian-American cultural and academic circles, I often received lists of worthy plays and books by writers I was accused of ignoring. But my inquiry had less to do with literary worth than with why this presumed worth had not been nationally recognized with Pulitzer Prizes or at least commercial successes comparable to those achieved by Italian Americans in the film business or record industry and other creative endeavors. The mass movement of Italians to America began more than a century ago, and thus their offspring certainly had adequate time since then to rise above whatever illiteracy prevailed in their homes and to develop writing skills and interesting dramas drawn from their backgrounds to emulate the great success, for example, of many Jewish-American novelists and playwrights (some of whom also came from marginally-literate working-class families), and the many renowned

Black-American writers who overcame even worse economic and social handicaps than other minority writers.

Would national recognition come only to those Italian-American writers who mocked their ethnic backgrounds in the manner of the old radio show *Life with Luigi*, or who presented it in a context conforming to the American media's most notorious stereotyping of Italian males—as *mafiosi*? The best-known contemporary Italian-American novelist, Mario Puzo, owes his fame not to such fine but uncommercial novels as *A Fortunate Pilgrim* but rather to *The Godfather*; while at the same time there exists no widely recognized body of work in American literature that deals typically with the Italian-American experience. The critically-acclaimed Don DeLillo has written ten novels—and not one about Italians. For a best-selling literary novel about representative Italian-American life it is necessary to go back more than a half-century and cite the success of *Christ in Concrete*.

It was written by Pietro di Donato, a grade school dropout who was born in 1911 in Hoboken, New Jersey, and became a bricklayer like his immigrant father. In 1937, he wrote a story for *Esquire* that recounted his father's death in a construction accident, and, in 1939, he expanded it into his bestseller—a novel that also became the Book-of-the-Month Club's main selection over John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. But while Steinbeck's subsequent work continued to attract a large readership and win literary prizes, di Donato's later efforts failed to maintain his popularity in the American mainstream—a level unequalled by other Italian Americans until Mario Puzo arrived in 1969 with *The Godfather*. Between the careers of these two men, however, there did emerge a prodigiously successful Italian-American mystery writer who in 1953 discarded his Italian surname and subsequently wrote several bestsellers under the names of "Ed McBain" and "Evan Hunter."

Born 65 years ago in Manhattan's Italian Harlem on the Upper East Side, and a graduate of Hunter College on the G.I. bill following his discharge from the Navy in 1946, the aspiring writer had grown weary of hearing his family name mispronounced after he had left the familiarity of his neighborhood. Ultimately, he also became convinced that his surname was detrimental to his acceptance as a writer with America's reading public. He concluded this while working in 1952 at a New York literary agency, from where he occasionally mailed out manuscripts to publishers that he himself had written under various pseudonyms. One day in 1953, he received a call from an editor eager to meet "Evan Hunter" and publish his novel. During the meeting, after the author had revealed his true identity and was relieved that this disclosure would not hinder the book's publication, he contemplated using his real name on the cover. But the editor discouraged him. "I know it's your book," the editor said, "but I can tell you this: 'Evan Hunter' is going

to sell more tickets." That week the author went to court to initiate the process of changing his name legally to "Evan Hunter" which is the only name he would thereafter answer to.

I also failed to see my own name on the first freelance work I sold after coming to New York in the 1950s. The magazine company's editor-in-chief, who had an Anglo-Saxon name, rejected my byline and used instead the name "Hyman Goldberg." I learned of this only after the editor had mailed me an advance copy of the magazine, along with my promised fee and a note explaining that he had decided not to use my name because it struck him as too attention-getting, and also somehow inappropriate for the subject of the article, which was about twin actresses then appearing in a Broadway musical. I was baffled by his reasoning then, as I am to this day; and while my fury prevented me from ever again communicating with him, I have since remained anything but dismissive of those Italian-American writers and academics who become emotional while offering explanations, theories, and excuses concerning the limited number of Italian-American names on bookshelves.

"The book business is made up of editors and publishers whose backgrounds are mostly Anglo-Saxon and Jewish," said Fred L. Gardaphe, an Italian-American writer and professor of English at Columbia College in Chicago, who made no secret of his chagrin at having his anthology of Italian-American literature turned down two years ago by every main commercial publisher he sent it to, after which he placed it with a small academic press. "The acceptance or rejection of manuscripts is influenced by editors' personal tastes and commercial judgements," he continued, "and with so few Italian-American editors in the mainstream, it's not surprising that there are so few widely-circulated books on Italian themes except of course, those dealing with gangsters. There are not only few Italian-American editors, but just as few book columnists and critics. In the print media as a whole, at least half the well-known Italian bylines you see belong to reporters writing about organized crime. The Italians are so metaphorically linked to organized crime that even Mario Cuomo was identified in a Mafia context by Bill Clinton during the Presidential campaign. And what chance did Geraldine Ferraro have against the so-called 'ethics' charges in her Democratic race for the Senate?" he said. "My God, what chance did Christopher Columbus have this past year in not being smeared as a villain? And what chance could my anthology featuring Italian male writers have in this climate? But if I'd submitted an anthology on African-American writing, or Native-American writing, or Hispanic writing, or Ethnic Women's writing, or Lesbian or Gay men's writing I'm confident I'd have found a commercial publisher. But we Italian Americans as a whole get little support from the mainstream.

"There's no Affirmative Action to push Italian Americans up the corporate ladder, or to get their kids into Harvard and Princeton. And the big news organizations and networks, which again are run by people who are mostly Anglo Saxon and Jewish, aren't recruiting young Italian Americans as they're recruiting other minorities—most often to avoid bias charges. Turn on your local TV news at night, and what you mostly see are anchormen and women who are Black, Hispanic, and Oriental. While the anchors on the three major networks remain, of course, white Anglo-Saxon males."

If I am overindulgent in the space I have allotted to the views of Mr. Gardaphe, it is because in a freewheeling way he encapsulates the frustrations and rationalizations that I have heard piecemeal from several other Italian-American writers and teachers, although these sources sometimes concede that Italian Americans themselves play a role in the situation they complain about. In an article published last year in *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Anthony DeCurtis—a writer and editor who earned a Ph.D. in English literature, who once taught English in college, and who now works for *Rolling Stone*—characterized the Italian Americans, generally speaking, as "too isolated, untrusting, and proud to make demands of the government," and at the same time "too unpolished and prole for the right wing" and "too independent and unfashionable for the left." Their "instinctive clannishness," Mr. DeCurtis suggested, has slowed their assimilation into the literary mainstream, although other factors were influential as well.

One factor mentioned by several people—including Mr. DeCurtis, whom I spoke to after reading his article—is the Italian Americans' lack of zeal in educating themselves in areas that might further their opportunities in publishing. Too many Italian Americans, they said are nonreaders, and thus fail to form a book-buying market that publishers cater to. Even those Italian Americans whose parents were born in the United States grew up most often in homes without books, or very few books; and those books available tended not to be ones that inspired a literary imagination, but instead were those of a practical nature, such as books on business, or cooking, or gardening or personal health. The popular classics in children's literature were rarely found in Italian-American homes. Few of the Italian Americans I spoke with—including those who overcame the odds to become editors, English professors, and writers—had enjoyed a childhood familiarity with Winnie the Pooh.

The 41-year-old Mr. DeCurtis, reared in an Italian neighborhood in Greenwich Village, remembers his mother—"an affectionate woman with a sweet voice"—trying to read to him as a child; "but she's hesitant, she was not a comfortable reader." Neither of his American-born parents had completed high school. And while scholarships would transport him from his neighbor-

hood and help to qualify him for positions at campuses and in editorial offices, he said he remained conscious of the fact that, among a majority of his colleagues in both places, there existed "a climate of shared experiences that I'd never had." And such experiences, he believes, often originate in a pre-adolescent bonding with the wondrous figures described in children's books.

A similar sense of youthful exclusion was acknowledged by 44-year-old Jay Parini, a novelist, poet, and professor of English at Middlebury College in Vermont. Born and reared in a nonliterary home to American-born parents in a coal-mining region of Pennsylvania, Mr. Parini first became aware as a young college teacher that nearly all of his students had cultivated a fondness for books much earlier in life than he. And if Parini has compensated for this in subsequent years, he apprehends it perhaps in the passion with which he presents to his classes those literary classics that changed his life after discovering them as a teenager in his high school library—the novels of Dickens, the poetry of Frost, and the works of other masters that inspired his devotion to literature and learning. But such a devotion is unfortunately not typical of Italian Americans, concedes Mr. Parini, who explained that during his teaching career—which began at Dartmouth, where he taught English literature for seven years before moving to Middlebury in 1982—he encountered very few Italian-American students who had elected to take advanced courses in literature.

This point was echoed by Frank Lentricchia, a 52-year-old writer and professor of English at Duke, and a onetime scholarship student from Utica New York, who has also taught at Rice University in Houston and at the University of California campuses in Irvine and in Los Angeles. In pondering the scarcity of Italian Americans registered in advanced literature courses, Mr. Lentricchia wonders if the brightest and most-ambitious of the young Italo-Americans are not just too pragmatic to be lured by the uncertain or meager financial rewards that too often accompany careers as writers and teachers of literature. He pointed out that many of these students are products of an ethnic past not long removed from hard labor and a hunger for job security, and that their traditions also stress a personal responsibility for the well-being of their families and friends—a responsibility that their Italian-born ancestors learned from experience should not be entrusted to characteristically inefficient, if not corrupt, government bureaucrats. As a result these brighter students, he suggested, gravitated toward such careers as medicine and the law, where, in addition to making money, they might also hire family members and friends as extras.

In any case, Mr. Lentricchia went on, only wayward souls like Parini and DeCurtis and himself have ventured into careers for which their personal

backgrounds seemingly provided so little foundation—those backgrounds being marked for the most part by growing up in homes without books.

Not only without books but without even bookcases, added Gerald Marzorati, a 39-year-old deputy editor at *Harper's* magazine, who recalls that in his Italian-American neighborhood in Paterson, New Jersey, he never saw bookshelves in his working-class home nor in the homes of his friends and classmates. Most of his male classmates regarded reading as "effeminate," Marzorati explained, and whenever a teacher read aloud from Shakespeare or another poet, Marzorati remembers trying to conceal his interest, not wanting to be perceived as different—more studious—than his macho contemporaries. Desiring to get ahead in class was, in a sense, leaving others behind, and therefore could be interpreted as a form of desertion and disloyalty.

Inspired by the revolutionary spirit of the Youth Movement that extended into the 1970s, Marzorati escaped the commonplace aspirations of the neighborhood and went on to college and a staff job on the *Soho News* before joining *Harper's*. But few of the neighborhood women pursued higher goals than the men, Marzorati came to realize, because both sexes were influenced by the neighborhood's prevailing old-fashioned Italian patriarchal system that (differing from the more matriarchal homes of Jewish and Black Americans) saw education and book-reading as a "threat" to the superiority of modestly-educated fathers. It was a threat that I myself connect historically to an ancient proverb I once saw quoted in a sociological study of Italian peasant families: "Never Educate Your Children Beyond Yourself."

That proverb reflects the thinking of impoverished families struggling to survive in the feudal system of class-stratified Italy, a system that existed in the South well into the nineteenth century. It warns against exposing young family members to alienating ideas that might be communicated by teachers or by the written word—ideas that could undermine the solidarity of the family, which was the patriarch's main source of comfort and strength in a land controlled by foreign oppressors. When such families immigrated to the United States, the "foreign oppressor" often took the form of American school boards and teachers. There were numerous reported incidents in New York City and elsewhere in which immigrant parents fought to keep their children from attending school, thus presenting a dilemma of divided loyalty to those children who determinedly rose above their backgrounds. An educator named Leonard Covello lamented that the process toward assimilating into the American mainstream often began "by learning to be ashamed of our parents."

Still there were countless parents who unselfishly assisted in the higher education of their children, doing so at times when the educators themselves

advised against it. This was true in my family. After I had completed high school in the lower half of my class, the principal told my father I was intellectually unfit for advanced learning and refused to write letters of recommendation in my behalf to any college in New Jersey, New York, or Pennsylvania. When my father insisted on financing my entrance into the University of Alabama, being encouraged by an alumnus who was his customer and fellow Rotarian, the principal chided my father and assured him he was wasting his money.

My Brooklyn-born cousin, Nicholas Pileggi, who had earned top grades in grammar school, discovered on entering high school that based entirely on his surname he was separated from his friends who were enrolled in college-preparatory courses and was grouped instead with those students who would presumably enter the job market after graduation. His complaints, accompanied by those of his parents, rectified the situation; and after matriculating at Long Island University, and receiving a degree in English literature, he would become a journalist, an author of nonfiction books, and a screenwriter. With Martin Scorsese, Pileggi would write the screenplay of *Goodfellas* which was based on his book, *Wiseguy*; it would win an Academy Award nomination.

Martin Scorsese's own upbringing on the Lower East Side was more representative of the nonacademic home life shared by Marzorati, Parini, and DeCurtis; and in DeCurtis' interview with Scorsese in *The South Atlantic Quarterly* the director recalled that during his student days at New York University he had shocked his parents one day by walking into their home carrying a book! "There were discussions about whether or not I should bring the book into the house, Scorsese told DeCurtis. Scorsese's American-born parents, who worked in the garment center, had failed to complete grammar school. The only reading matter in their home were tabloid newspapers, and Scorsese said he grew up "cowed a little by the tyranny of art" and particularly "the tyranny of the word over the image."

It was perhaps natural, he suggested, that he would initially shy away from words and seek to express himself in pictures. In fact, the critic and academician Camille Paglia thinks of film as a truer, more traditional outlet for artistic Italian Americans than books. She sees the great internationally-known modern filmmakers like Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola and others, as kinsmen of the Renaissance artists who pleased the popes and ennobled the museums of the world. I could add reasons of my own to explain why the art of the written word has less appeal than film-making to Italian Americans.

The writer's life is a solitary one, and I believe solitude is a most unnatural condition for the village-dwelling people that the Italians essentially are, and

the crowd-pleasing performers they strive to become whenever the least bit of attention is paid to them. Whether their piazza is occupied by film crews offering them parts in movies, or invading armies offering them preferential treatment as collaborators, the ordinary Italian is adept at playing many roles, as indeed has been his entire country through its centuries of taking directions from many masters.

Such a history has made it wise to put nothing in writing of a personal nature, nothing that might expose one's family and friends to the scrutiny of authoritarian forces—be they foreign despots, domestic dictators, or the pious censors of the Holy See. The word is dangerous. It is traceable to a single source. And I also believe that these ancient concerns were transferred to America—we reluctant Italian-American writers are extending the reticence of our forebears, evading scrutiny as they had for centuries in the harsh extremities of their homeland that is justly renowned for its saints and sinners, its Holy Fathers and Godfathers, its unstable governments, its stable families, its arias, its silences and its legacy of laying low.